
Factbox-Georgia's breakaway Abkhazia region

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Georgia's separatist province of Abkhazia sent 1,000 troops to a disputed gorge on Sunday, effectively opening a "second front" in Tbilisi's battle to regain control over its breakaway regions of South Ossetia and Abkhazia.

Georgia sees their return as a top national priority.

Here are some facts about Abkhazia:

HISTORY:

* A Black Sea region bordering Russia, Abkhazia was once the favourite holiday destination of the Soviet Union's elite. It accounts for about half of Georgia's coastline.

* Abkhazia is internationally recognised as part of Georgia but it has declared itself an independent state. It fought a war in the early 1990s to drive out Tbilisi's forces. The conflict killed an estimated 10,000 people and forced hundreds of thousands to leave their homes.

* Georgia says just under 250,000 people -- most of them ethnic Georgians -- were driven out by the conflict and are now registered as internally displaced. Abkhazia's separatist authorities dispute this, saying there are no more than 160,000 internally displaced people.

BUILD-UP TO CONFLICT:

* On coming to power in January 2004 after a bloodless revolution, pro-Western Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili vowed to make reuniting the country his top priority.

* On April 16, 2008, then Russian President Vladimir Putin ordered his government to intensify ties with Abkhazia and Ossetia, a second Georgian breakaway territory. Tbilisi said the move amounted to a "creeping annexation" of its land by Moscow.

* Russia can deploy up to 3,000 peacekeeping troops in Abkhazia under a 1994 ceasefire agreement. Tbilisi complains the Russian troops are effectively propping up the separatists. Moscow says they are all that is preventing more bloodshed.

* Early in May, Russia sent extra troops to counter what it said was a Georgian plan to attack Abkhazia, though Tbilisi denied any such intention. Observers say Russia's contingent remains within the 3,000 limit. They say Russia for the first time re-enforced its troops with tracked armoured personnel carriers equipped with cannon.

* A May 26 U.N. report said a Russian air force jet had shot down a Georgian unmanned spy plane over Abkhazia on April 20. Russia denied involvement, saying the Georgian plane was shot down by a separatist anti-aircraft missile. The separatists say they have shot down seven Georgian spy drones so far in 2008.

* Saakashvili proposed a peace deal under which South Ossetia and Abkhazia would be given "a large degree of autonomy" within a federal state. The

separatists have said they will settle for nothing less than full independence.

THE PEOPLE:

* Abkhazia's separatist administration says the region's population is 340,000. Tbilisi says that is artificially inflated.

* The Abkhaz people are ethnically distinct from Georgians. They say they were forcibly absorbed into Georgia under Soviet rule and now want to exercise their right to self-determination.

* According to the International Crisis Group think tank, a Soviet census in 1989 showed ethnic Abkhaz accounted for 18 percent of the region's population, ethnic Georgians 45 percent and other groups, mostly Russians and Armenians, the rest.

* Starting in the late 1990s, some ethnic Georgians began returning to their homes in Abkhazia's Gali district, near the de facto border with Georgia. About 50,000 people have returned to the district.

* Separatist officials say over 80 percent of residents in Abkhazia have been issued with Russian passports. Russia's government pays pensions to Abkhaz retirees.
